

April 17, 2018

New York's LaGuardia Airport is a bit tricky for airline pilots. LGA, as we call it, can be like quicksand—easy to get stuck in. Fortunately, today is not one of those days, and it looks like my first officer and I are going to escape the LGA trap without any worries. We push back on time, taxi out to runway 31, and are cleared for takeoff before we even get to the end of the runway. It's First Officer Darren Ellisor's turn to fly, so I get us lined up and give him the plane. He pushes the throttles up, and we're off in a New York minute. The city quickly falls away behind us as we point our nose southwest and settle in for a four-hour flight to Dallas Love Field. What a beautiful day to fly!

About twenty minutes into the flight, as we climb through 32,500 feet over eastern Pennsylvania, this beautiful day turns ugly.

*BOOM!*

Something explodes like an artillery shell, and it feels like we've been T-boned by a Mack truck. A quick look at the cockpit gauges tells me our left engine is dead. This isn't good, but it's manageable. I've been practicing single-engine failures in the simulator for twenty-four years.

A fraction of a second later, "not good" becomes "not good at all." The jet, a Boeing 737-700, quickly rolls off to the left. The nose is pulled down into a dive. Darren and I both lunge for the controls and start correcting the aircraft back to "wings level." Seeing Darren has the situation in hand, I give him the plane, nodding my head and showing him my hands off the controls. Something more than an engine failure has happened, but what? A bone-jarring shudder runs through the aircraft. A second later, chaos takes over.

The air pressure plummets, and Darren and I can't breathe. The air-conditioning system fills the cockpit with gray smoke just as the air is being sucked out of the aircraft and out of our lungs. A sharp pain pierces our ears, and our heads are engulfed by a deafening roar, so loud we can't hear anything else, not even each other. The plane vibrates so hard that our instruments become unreadable, a crazy blur. We can't focus our eyes on the cockpit instruments, and an incredible invisible drag continues to pull on our

737. We have not practiced *this* in the simulator.

We need our oxygen masks first.

Amid the confusion, I have a forced moment of solitude. I cannot see, I cannot hear, and I cannot breathe. I am isolated in one of life's brief pauses, and adrenaline compresses my thoughts into an instant. This isn't the first time I've been in an out-of-control aircraft. It isn't the first time I've flown without all the information I need. It isn't the first time I've come breathtakingly close to disaster.

My thoughts are distilled to their simplest form: bad news/good news. The bad news? With this fierce, abusive shuddering, I'm not sure everything we need to stay in flight will remain attached to the aircraft. This might be the day I meet my Maker face-to-face.

The good news? We're still flying. So it's time to get to work.